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Allegheny County recount underway in controversial Pa. Senate race

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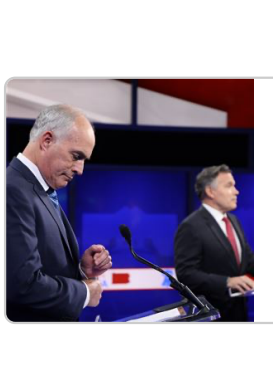
As the first rays of sunlight shone through the windows of Allegheny County's election warehouse on Pittsburgh's North Side on Wednesday, about 100 county employees arrived to a square formation of scanners prepared to comb through hundreds of thousands of ballots to recount votes for U.S. Senate.

By next week, similar setups across the state will decide the winner of the race between three-term incumbent Democratic Sen. Bob Casey and Republican challenger David McCormick, who is thousands of votes ahead in his upset bid.

Most Republicans maintain that the race should be long over, including Mr. McCormick himself, who declared victory weeks ago and has urged Mr. Casey to concede. But Mr. McCormick's lead dipped to below 18,000 votes last week, well within the margin of the half-percentage-point needed to trigger an automatic recount.

Instead of contacting Secretary of State Al Schmidt to override the recount by dropping out, Mr. Casey has chosen to play his last card.



Benjamin Kail
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The atmosphere in the North Side warehouse — decidedly less tense than the headlines about the race — was subdued and reflective of the early morning hours, with radio-friendly rock and jazz music softly echoing around the workers as they shuffled through stacks of ballots.

Several dozen employees stood in front of the stout ballot scanners — shaped like rolling trash cans with their lids up — as workers wearing black-and-yellow "Allegheny City Elections Staff" T-shirts moved amongst them to make sure everything was going smoothly.

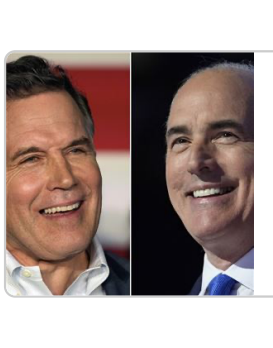
"I'm the only one in this whole row who knows what I'm doing," joked one employee, prompting chuckles from those around him.

Observers from both campaigns milled about behind a barrier separating them from the machines, occasionally peering over the workers' shoulders and asking questions. One observer wearing a McCormick campaign hat sat in a folding chair with an open energy drink in his hand, mentally preparing for the long day ahead.

The scene during the first count was much different when more than twice as many people were involved and the high-tech Bluecrest Vantage mail sorter was busy ripping open 50,000 mail-in ballots per hour, said Paul Towhey, a consultant for the Republican Committee of Allegheny County.

"We can hear the music… I wouldn't even know if music was on," during election day Nov. 5, he said between sips of coffee.

Mr. Towhey, who served as an observer once before during the recount between Mr. McCormick and Mehmet Oz during the Republican Senate primary in 2022, described the warehouse staff as "competent and well-organized" but said he was prepared to point out an issue if he saw one.



Adam Babetski
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"It's like pornography — you can't really define it but you know it when you see it," he said, referencing former Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart's famous standard for obscenity from Jacobellis v. Ohio.

On Election Day, the ballot scanners serviced each of Allegheny's 1,317 precincts — part of the efficient infrastructure that helped the county complete its tally that night.

The county is flipping its process for the recount to ensure accuracy: Mail-in ballots will be scanned on the precinct machines, while all other ballots will be scanned on the eight machines that handled mail-ins on Election Day.

This method, along with a hand count of the votes, are the only two legal ways to conduct a recount in Pennsylvania, said Allegheny County Elections Manager Dave Voye. No machine that scanned a ballot on election day is allowed to scan that same ballot during a recount, he said.

Allegheny County purchased both kinds of scanners in 2019 following a state Supreme Court ruling that approved mail-in voting without excuses for all Pennsylvania residents, said Abigail Gardner, the director of communications for County Executive Sara Innamorato.

While there are fewer of the larger machines, they are a model of efficiency and can process up to 280 votes per minute, she said.

Counting the roughly 200,000 mail-in ballots shouldn't take longer than a day due to the sheer number of precinct machines, but counting other ballots — around a half-million in total — on the eight larger machines could create a temporary backlog despite their vote-scanning prowess, said Ms. Gardner.

"That is the more likely place where a bottleneck can happen," she said. "If we can't get through all of those on Wednesday, then we'll continue to count on Thursday."

Election workers all across the state are finding themselves in a familiar place as the recount begins.

On Tuesday morning in neighboring Washington County, 10 polling machines and two mail-in machines tasked with processing the county's 120,000-plus Senate votes whirred to life in the basement of the elections office, with lawyers from both candidates' camps on-site to observe the proceedings.

Like in Allegheny County, the mail-in machines are counting poll votes and vice-versa, said County Commissioner Nick Sherman, who oversaw Washington County's recount of the Republican Senate primary between Mr. McCormick and Mr. Oz.

Mr. Sherman was confident that this year's process would be wrapped up by next Monday without incident. So far, he hasn't dealt with any legal challenges.

"We're expecting everything to go very smoothly," he said.

The final tally in Allegheny County is likely to be a bit different than the original count.

On Monday, the Board of Elections voted to approve 1,310 more provisional ballots out of 3,328 that were up for consideration. Nearly a quarter of the newly approved ballots were simply missing a signature from at least one member of the board, which rectified the error.

Campaign lawyers can object to the board's decisions on all of the outstanding provisional ballots through Wednesday, at which point it would head to court, said Ms. Gardner. If things remain as is, the 1,310 votes will be processed and added to the total soon after.

Washington County did not approve any provisional ballots to be included in the recount. County officials voted to reject all 347 provisional ballots cast by individuals who were not registered voters and another 57 cast by individuals who were registered in a different county or state, said Mr. Sherman.

Neither Allegheny nor Washington counties will be attempting to count any unsigned or misdated ballots, in line with the state Supreme Court ruling on the subject. Four Pennsylvania counties attempted to defy the ruling last week, prompting the court to firmly respond that the votes "shall not be counted."

Mr. Voye expected the final count to be slightly different than the first time but did not think that Mr. Casey would be able to make up enough ground to win. Although the recount is mandated by law, Mr. Voye said that it helps to build trust in election integrity.

"If you recount every ballot cast and you come up with roughly the same vote total, I think it confirms the reliability of the equipment," he said.

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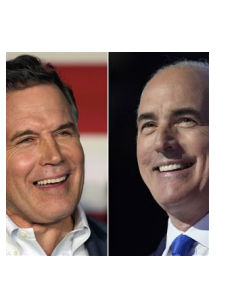

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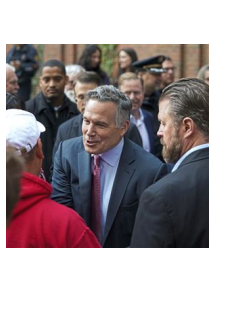

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Well said...hits all the issues the article failed to cover properly.
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You have to understand this is the PG. Nothing but a cheerleader for the Democratic Party. They have no credibility anymore when it comes to politics.
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Kolo
20 November, 2024
Not expressing an opinion either way here, but Mr. Casey could have made it known, in writing, that he did not desire a recount. So yeah, it is mandated, unless the person with the lesser vote count does not wish for a recount.
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Andrew
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This recount will cost the taxpayers over $1 million and the procedure goes against the rulings of the PA Supreme Court. Poor little Bobby can't accept the fact that he lost so he pouts and stamps his feet. It's mathematically impossible for him to win but he feels compelled to fight—more than he's...
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Richard Stallman
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his daddy can't rigg him to victory this time. wants another 18 years to do nothing for the people of pennsylvania. good riddance
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Oren Spiegler
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I think we all know that the expensive recount is not going to find at least 18,000 votes for Bob Casey. He would lose nothing by conceding. If he conceded and a miracle occurred in which he were found to have prevailed, the concession would not undo the Casey victory.
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Jake From State Farm
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The law says if you're in a small percentage of votes, a mandatory recount must take place. Casey will still lose. Casey could spread the rigged voter fraud excuse like many did in the 2020 election, I'm sure once all the votes are counted Casey will concede.
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Kaveh Ilkhanipour
21 November, 2024
Our great state is long overdue for an overhaul of its vote tabulation process. Makes no sense to start counting mail in ballots the evening of the election. This only leads to delayed voting results and breeds distrust of the vote counting process. Imploring governor Shapiro to update our current ...
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Andy Roy
20 November, 2024
Meanwhile, your president has authorized Ukraine to fire US missiles into Russia, as well as use anti-personnel mines….bringing us closer to WWIII…..but the media and Dems are focused on Matt gaetz and men being able to play in girl sports…. Brilliant!
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Commander Cody
20 November, 2024
I saw a Chinese balloon hover over the warehouse and drop numerous bags of ballots on to the roof. The balloon then quietly self-destructed. When Casey suddenly has more votes and wins, then we will know what happened. There's video! You won't hear about THAT on MSM!
(Edited)
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David St. Hubbins
20 November, 2024
That made me chuckle out loud. Well done.
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Bradley Easterday
20 November, 2024
The important takeaway is that there are Democrat elected officials who will be going to jail.
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WinstonSmith1984
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And this is exactly why people believe Democrats cheat in elections...have you read about the MN judge?
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carol lynch
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Casey, man up and bow out.There's probably a lobbyist job with your name on it.
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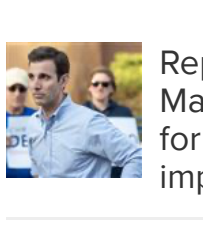

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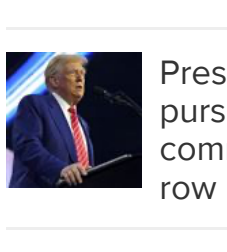

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